Charges dropped against climate protesters; Crown says prosecution of activists at Bloor Viaduct not 'in the public interest'

The Toronto Star

November 19, 2019 Tuesday

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Section: GREATER TORONTO; Pg. GT1

Length: 661 words

Byline: May Warren Toronto Star

Body

Prosecutors have dropped charges against a group of 20 protesters who shut down the Bloor Viaduct as part of the global climate protest last month.

The Crown on Monday said it "would not be in the public interest" to continue charging the protesters, who blocked the key bridge to traffic for several hours during the morning rush hour on Oct. 7, apologizing for the inconvenience but warning the disturbances would only get worse if the world doesn't act on climate change.

The group of 10 men and 10 women ranging between the ages of 22 and 72 was facing charges of mischief under $5,000. They traded hugs outside after their appearance in a packed College Park courtroom Monday, and posed for group photos.

Defense lawyer Mike Leitold noted that the charges arose out of "direct action on the climate emergency," which was in the public interest.

The protesters and their supporters packed the small College Park courtroom so tightly that those not charged were asked to leave. They went up as a group and one by one their charges were withdrawn.

Protestor Penny Bettson said she had "mixed" feelings on the outcome, saying "it's released us so that we're free to plan more."

She said she was told to prepare her reasons for being arrested before court and came up with a few sentences that summed it up: "Politicians, big corporations and banks are not paying attention to the climate crisis," she said.

"The only rational thing I can do is to continue to rebel."

Outside the courtroom before the appearance, Amanda Sinclair, who was dressed in a cow onesie, said she was "angry" about being treated as a criminal for speaking up.

"We need to be disrupting people," she said. "We're fighting for everybody's lives here."

Afterward, she said she saw the charges being withdrawn as "one hurdle" in the fight for climate justice.

"It's good that the charges have been dropped because it normalizes what we're doing," she said.

Jenny McQueen, clad in a brown bull hat, which she removed inside court, said that although she was "elated," a trial would have brought "extra awareness for the climate emergency and for the harm that animal agriculture is doing to the planet and obviously for animals."

Protesters were making a "worldwide" point, she said.

"Not everyone" needs to go so far as to be arrested, McQueen said, but everyone needs to do their part.

The October demonstration was organized by Animal Rebellion and Extinction Rebellion, also known as XR.

The local chapter is an offshoot of a U.K.-based group that wants to end the animal agriculture and fishing industries, stop mass extinction and minimize the risk of climate breakdown and social collapse.

The organization disrupted life in more than 60 cities this fall, with tactics that ranged from gluing themselves to a power company's entrance in Amsterdam, to burying their heads in the sand on a beach in Sydney. One man even climbed on top of a plane at London's City Airport to delay a flight.

The Toronto protests happened amid an international wave of climate change protests.

A 2018 report from the UN body on climate change found that carbon emissions need to be cut in almost half by 2030 to lessen some of the worst impacts, such as droughts, floods and other extreme weather. To do that, 2020 is a make-it-or-break-it year. In May, another UN report found that one million species are at risk globally.

There's been a growing trend around the world of civil disobedience in the face of the climate crisis.

Actress Jane Fonda has been trying to get arrested on Capitol Hill in Washington every Friday until the end of the year, to protest government inaction on climate.

A critical meeting of the UN's climate body will be held in Spain in early December.

Stephen Lye was also among those arrested.

"If we don't change we just go down," he said while holding his 19-month-old son outside the courtroom. "But it takes time to turn the ship around. You have to act like it's an emergency not just say it's an emergency."

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Document-Type: COLUMN

Publication-Type: NEWSPAPER

Subject: NEGATIVE MISC NEWS (92%); NEGATIVE NEWS (90%); NEGATIVE PERSONAL NEWS (90%); PROTESTS & DEMONSTRATIONS (90%); PUBLIC PROSECUTORS (90%); ARRESTS (89%); NEGATIVE ENVIRONMENTAL NEWS (89%); LITIGATION (79%); CLIMATE ACTION (78%); CLIMATE CHANGE (78%); ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE (78%); MAMMALS (78%); LAWYERS (73%); EMOTIONS (66%)

Industry: PUBLIC PROSECUTORS (90%); LAWYERS (73%); AGRICULTURE, FORESTRY, FISHING & HUNTING (60%)

Geographic: ONTARIO, CANADA (58%)

Load-Date: November 19, 2019

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